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The Outlook Interview: Jeane Kirkpatrick Talks to Lally Weymouth

Why Tolerate Sniping White House Aides, Leaks and Unfair Labels?

Q: During the first Reagan administration there were a number of well-publicized divisions among and within the Departments of State and Defense and the National Security Council. How do you think American foreign policy has been affected by such things as the public feuds between Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger?

A: I think it is inevitable and desirable that a president have more than one counselor on foreign affairs, just as he has a number of counselors on economic policy.

What is not natural, inevitable or desirable is to have discussions within an administration aired in public. It inhibits and distorts such discussions, if only because the accounts that are leaked to the media are always inaccurate and incomplete. Frequently, by the way, this kind of leak is used to strengthen the position of one of the contenders in the internal policy discussions. Often, it is used to assassinate the character or intelligence of some of the participants. I think that's appalling, and that it has a negative effect on the conduct of government.

Q: Haven't you been one of the main victims of such leaks?

A: There's no doubt about that. In the Washington Post editorial endorsing Walter Mondale, there was a paragraph about the divisions within the administration. It said that they were nearly unprecedented, and that the worst attacks on [former National Security Adviser Richard Allen, CIA Director Bill Casey, Presidential Counselor Ed Meese, Interior Secretary Bill Clark, myself, Cap Weinberger and I don't remember who else had come from within the administration. This creates a terrible circumstance under which to live and work. It has a bad effect on morale,

policy, the president and the government.

In the November issue of Encounter magazine the British journalist and historian Paul Johnson describes the extent to which major media have been manipulated to serve as "bulletin boards" for the political ambitions of insiders. You can't necessarily blame the media, but you can ask that they scrutinize "insider" accounts as closely as they do on-the-record statements.

I once wrote a piece in which I said that there was a paper triangle formed by the symbiotic relationship between journalists, anonymous sources and the public. That relationship is dangerous to public policy and the public interest, be-

There still may be some special sort of resentment of women in high politics in this country.

cause it distorts the public's information.

The worst thing about anonymous "information" is that it resists verification. Typically, there's no effort made even to verify it. An extraordinary pattern has developed in which some journalists — particularly those who cover Washington — actually prefer anonymous sources to on-the-record sources and assume that things said "for attribution" are less reliable than some secret "insider" version. What emerges are fictive accounts of public events and public personalities in which public information is exploited for private purposes.

Demoralization of government occurs when colleagues become adversaries bent on the destruction of one part of the administration. But most serious of all, at least from the point of view of someone with a

long-range vested interest in the reliability of public accounts, is the falsification of history — not just its distortion, but its falsification.

Q: Most of the leaks designed to undermine you are said to have originated with senior White House aides. Why do you think they are doing this to you?

A: I don't know. During my brief period in public life I have had an extraordinary experience with disinformation of one kind or another. The simplest and the easiest to understand is the sort disseminated by the KGB. I probably have been a target for more of that than any other member of the administration, except the president.

There are several documented cases in the State Department's disinformation studies, including the circulation of forged letters, scholarly monographs and interviews that have made their way into both the American press and that of the Third World.

That kind of disinformation is easy to understand since it comes from our real opponents in the world. What I don't understand and what I have found much harder to bear, frankly, is the characterization of me as some kind of right-wing extremist, an ideologue and anti-democrat.

Take Central America, where I have been depicted continually as an extreme hard-liner. Actually, inside administration policy discussions, I probably have opposed the use of force by the United States in Central America more often and more strongly than any member of this government. I don't mean the use of U.S. combat troops, because nobody's ever suggested that; I mean any kind of force, even in principle. I wasn't even present when the United States decided to go to Grenada.

Lally Weymouth is a free-lance writer. She conducted this interview for The Los Angeles Times.

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